

The Latvian Parliament will meet on 3rd June to elect the President of the Republic

Abstract :

On 10th April last the President of the Latvian Republic Andris Berzins told his fellow countrymen that he did not wish to remain for a further mandate as Head of State. According to a poll by TNS Latvia for the TV channel LNT 2/3 of the Latvians (68%) backed the outgoing head of State's decision. 41% of them said that Mr Berzins had chosen to do this because he knew that he did not have enough support within the Saeima, Parliament's only chamber. The outgoing President is the first in Latvia's history to give up on a second mandate due to personal reasons in justification of his decision.

The Presidential Office

The Latvian head of State is elected for four year mandate (renewable once) by the absolute majority of the 100 members of the Saeima. Voting is undertaken via a secret ballot. The post is open to any Latvian (who is not a national of any other country) aged at least 40. Candidates must enter their bid at least 50 days and 45 days at the latest before the end of the mandate of the head of State in office i.e. between 19th and 24th May this year.

If none of the candidates win the 51 votes vital for his/her election after two rounds a further election is organised two weeks later. Candidates have five days to announce that they will run. If again there is no absolute majority another election is organised.

In Latvia the President of the Republic represents the Latvian State across the world. He ratifies international treaties, appoints diplomatic representatives and accredits foreign diplomatic representatives. He is head of the armed forces, leads the National Council and can grant amnesty.

The head of State can suggest laws as well as a referendum on the dissolution of the Saeima. If a majority of the electorate approve, Parliament is dissolved and general elections are organised within the two months following the vote. However if more than half of the

electorate vote against dissolution, the President of the Republic has to resign from office and the Saeima then elects his successor for the remainder of the presidential mandate.

On the request of at least half of the MPs the head of State can be impeached by Parliament during a closed session if at least 2/3 of its members vote in support. In this event the Saeima immediately elects a new President of the Republic.

According to a poll by Latvijas Fakti in April last 60.3% of the Latvians said they wanted the head of State to have more power than the parties.

The Candidates

Four people have officially declared they are standing for the presidency on 3rd June next:

- Raimonds Vejonis, co-Chair of the Green Party of Latvia (LZP) and chair of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) – he is the present Defence Minister. He was appointed by the leaders of his party instead of the Mayor of Liepaja, Uldis Sesks;
- Egils Levits, a judge at the European Court of Justice, supported by the National Alliance (All for Latvia Union (VL) and the Fatherland and Freedom Union (TB/LNNK)) ;
- Martin Bondars (Regions Alliance, Latvijas Reģionu Apvienība, LRA), who was head cabinet of former Pre-

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sident of the Republic Vaira Viķe-Freiberga (1999-2007);

– Sergejs Dolgopolovs (Harmony Centre, SC), MP.

The electoral process

The election of the head of State in Latvia comprises a power struggle between the various political parties which use the election to increase their influence over the political landscape or in terms of the parties leading the country, over the government coalition. Some analysts also suggest that the ZZS is more interested in the post of Prime Minister than that of President of the Republic.

The present government is led by Laimdota Straujuma, bringing together Unity (Vienotiba, V), the ZZS and the National Alliance. It was divided over its choice of candidate to the supreme office: indeed two partners in the coalition are running in the election. This division has weakened the government. Firstly Unity maintained that it supported Defence Minister Raimonds Vejonis but others expressed their support for Egils Levits.

The Prime Minister's party even wondered whether it might put a candidate forward: the names of Sandra Kalniete (V), former minister, former European Commissioner and present MEP (EPP), of MP Solvita Abol-tina (V) and MEP Artis Pabriks (EPP) were circulated for a time.

The two parties – Unity and ZZS – only have 44 seats in the Saeima – i.e. -7 in comparison with the minimum required to elect Raimonds Vejonis in the first round of the election on 3rd June.

The internet site mansprezidents.lv (My President) offers Latvians aged 16 and over to vote on-line for their head of State. Its founder Madara Peipina hopes that every citizen will express his/her support to one candidate or another aiming to make the appointment process of the candidates for the head of State transparent and understandable for everyone.

In all likelihood, since there is no agreement within the government coalition, the President of the Republic will not be elected in the first round of voting.

Raimonds Vejonis succeeds Andris Berzins as President of the Republic

Corinne Deloy

Abstract:

The co-Chair of the Green Party (LZP) and Chairman of the Green and Farmers' Union (ZZS), Raimond Vejonis, Defence Minister was elected President of the Republic of Latvia by members of the Saeima (Parliament) during the fifth round of voting on 3rd June. He won 55 votes, i.e. the absolute majority. 42 MPs voted against, 1 voting slip was declared invalid.

Results

THE ELECTION

Four candidates were running at the start of voting: Raimonds Vejonis; Sergejs Dolgopolovs, a Harmony Centre MP (SC); Egils Levits, a judge at the European

Court of Justice, supported by the National Alliance (All for Latvia (VL) and the Fatherland and Freedom Union (TB/LNNK) and Martin Bondars (Regions Alliance, Latvijas Regionu Apvieniba, LRA).

Martin Bondars withdrew from the race after the second round since he only won 7 votes during each of the first two rounds. Sergejs Dolgopolovs withdrew after the third round in which he won 23 votes whilst Raimonds Vejonis won 35 votes and Egils Levits 26. As of the third round the number of candidates gradually decreased until there was only one candidate who won the majority of votes. Raimonds Vejonis, won 46 votes in the 4th round (against 26 for Egils Levits), was therefore the only candidate in the 5th round.

"I am very happy with the election of Raimonds Vejonis," declared Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma (Unity, Vienotība, V) after the President election, maintaining that the departure of the Defence Minister would not weaken the government.

"I am going to do everything I can to continue work to strengthen Latvia's security and improve the country's well-being. We are right to be optimistic about our future and we are proud of what we have achieved. I shall do everything so that Latvians, the political parties and the parliament work together to take decisions that will make Latvia more prosperous. Serving the country is an honour for me," declared the President elect in his speech to the members of the Saeima.

"Without a doubt my priority will be national security, the strengthening of our armed forces and our borders," stressed Raimonds Vejonis, indicating that he wants to improve relations with Moscow. *"Latvia and its partners are prepared to undertake constructive dialogue with Russia but as long as Russian missiles and heavy weapons are being deployed in Ukraine this is not really possible,"* he said.

Like Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia wants NATO to deploy several thousand soldiers on a permanent basis on its territory to counter the Russian threat. *Moreover as President of the Republic I shall have the opportunity of discussing ecologist ideas more widely and to work towards Latvia becoming truly a green country,"* he maintained.

THE NEW PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

Raimonds Vejonis was born on 15th June 1966 of a Latvian father and a Russian mother in the region of Pskov (Western Russia) where his father was serving in the Soviet army. He is a graduate in biology and chemistry from the University of Latvia.

From 1989 to 1996, he worked as Deputy Director of the Regional Environment Council of the town of Madona (Vidzeme) before becoming Director of the Regional Environmental department of Riga (1996-2002).

Raimonds Vejonis started his political career in 1990 as town councillor in Madona. He was appointed Environment Minister in 2002, a portfolio he maintained under five successive Prime Ministers until 2011. In January 2014 he was appointed Defence Minister as part of Laimdota Straujuma's government.

On 3rd June, Raimonds Vejonis became the first ecologist President in the European Union (and the first minister to be elected to this post in Latvia). *"However he shares little with the majority of European greens who are generally positioned to the left of the political scale,"* indicates Iveta Kazoka, a political analyst who adds, *"his membership of the Green Party is more to do with political opportunity, a choice that is motivated more by career than by sound ideological beliefs."*

In May Raimonds Vejonis said to the daily *Diena* that his interest in ecology was strengthened when he learned that his grandfather had become blind after having used certain chemical products on a Soviet collective farm.

However the election of the new head of State is, in the opinion of Juris Rozenvalds, a professor in Political Science at the University of Latvia, beneficial for the Russian speaking community of Latvia. *"Raimonds Vejonis is the President of the Republic of a NATO country (after having been an*

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acknowledged and well-liked Defence Minister) and has Russian roots. His mother is Russian, he was born in the region of Pskov and incidentally he chose to grant his first interview to the Latvian Russian-speaking TV channel," he stressed.

Raimonds Vejonis will officially take over from Andris Brezins as head of the country on 7th July next.

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